The fact that clients possess assets and strengths that enable them to survive in caustic environments is one of the foundations for the "strengths perspective." Five assumptions that comprise this perspective are: clients have innate strengths, need motivation that is self-defined, self-discovery can occur with aided exploration, client strengths counteract the urge to "blame the victim," and all environments have important resources for recovery. Solution-focused interviewing and posing a "miracle question" are other tools that assist in positive problem resolution, the basis of the strengths perspective.

A Strengths Perspective and Solution-focused Approach to New Conversations

By Lauren Eimers

In 1989, Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, and Kishardt coined the term "strengths perspective" to address a system in which practitioners recognize the authority and assets a client possesses in the client's frame of reference to their life story. The strengths perspective is defined by five assumptions and requires solution-focused interviewing (collaboration, curiosity, context-based conversations) to aid the client in problem resolution where solutions don't necessarily connect with the problem but the process may help dissolve it. Key concepts of solution-focused interviewing assist in a pattern for positive problem resolution, a foundation of the strengths perspective practice which offers ways to bypass what's not working.

The strengths perspective assumes (Saleebey, 1992, pp. 5-7): Primarily, that all clients and environments possess strengths that can be marshaled to improve on quality of life. Second, motivation should occur with a consistent emphasis on self-defined client strengths. Third, it is only through exploration between family and the helping person (listener and teller relationship) that discovery of client strengths can occur, with an emphasis on the definition of strengths lying ultimately in the client's hands. Fourth, "blaming the victim" is counteracted by the prominence of the client's strengths even in the most adverse of environments, which leads to the fifth assumption that all environments, no matter how unfavorable, contain utilizable resources.

The practice of solution-focused interviewing is a co-constructive process (weaving a story) and relies on two developments (DeJong, 1995, pp. 733-35): the development of well-formed goals (Berg and Miller, 1992) and the development of solutions that the client finds achievable based on "exceptions" to he problem defined by the client.

Goals must be small, important to the client, and specific. The goals of the client should also emphasize presence of something positive in their lives, rather than the absence of something. Conceptualizing goals (hopes and dreams) as a process rather than solely an end assists the practitioner is aiding the client in forming attainable goals that also seem realistic within the client's frame of reference. These goals can also protect the client's dignity if they are viewed as involving effort on the client's part. Success in achieving the goal is meaningful for the client, while failure only implies more effort will have to be made and that change is difficult.

The strengths perspective also demands the helper explore the exceptions in the family's life in which the problem in the client's life could have occurred, but did not (DeJong, 734). The helping person should focus on the logistics of the exceptions to the client's problem rather than the problem itself. This brings the focus on the positive times in the client's frame of existence rather than the negative. The client's strengths are naturally brought into perspective and then rallied to create solutions that are custom-made for the client's life.

Solution-focused interviewing emphasizes resolutions rather than problems and the client can be guided to developing well-formed goals rather than dwelling on their problems with a few key questions (Stalling, 1993, pp.9-10). The "miracle question" is an excellent way to begin the solution process (de Shazer, 1988). This question asks the client to imagine a miracle has occurred in which the problem they are having is somehow solved and how could they tell that miracle has occurred. Satellite questions designed to take the client away from focusing on their difficulties in exchange for focus on imagining a future where the problem is solved. These questions help elucidate well-formed goals in the client's frame of reference.

After the miracle question has been posed, exception-finding questions could follow, aiding the practitioner and client to instances where the problem should have manifested itself, yet did not. The details to these situations could aid in pulling from

past and present successes in building a solution. This not only empowers the client by allowing them to "discover the considerable power within themselves" (Saleeby, 1992, p.8), but assists the client in "conceptualizing their own world and making decisions about how to live in it" (De Jong, 1995, p.738).

All in all, a strengths perspective approach to life story problem solving compels not only the client, but the listener, to view the proverbial cup as "half-full" in regards to problem resolution. Solution-focused interviewing, with an emphasis on exceptions, is an invaluable tool to guide the family's story to formulate feasible goals and successes as a team.

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